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Network your home office: it's easier than you think

E-BIZ

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Should you network your home office? From my perspective, the answer is a resounding yes. As an entrepreneur who has been working from home for eight years, I believe that enabling a local area network (LAN) is one of the most astute technology investments.

Two years ago, I tackled the intricacies of LAN technology to set up a home network. The benefits have been difficult to gauge precisely, but they are clearly significant. The network has helped to improve the productivity and creativity of this small business.

Many small office/home office (SOHO) entrepreneurs should consider pursuing this path. No doubt many of you have more than one personal computer — perhaps a desktop and a laptop. You probably spend a fair bit of time shifting files from one to the other, and wonder whether there is a better way. You may know a bit about LAN technology and have read about the wired home, but aren't quite convinced that you have the expertise to put it in place.

Relax — it's not that bad. The challenge may seem daunting, particularly if you don't have a technical bent. But implementing a LAN can be straightforward, particularly because the Windows and Macintosh operating systems come with built-in networking capabilities.

The first issue to deal with is physical infrastructure. If your computers are close together, you could simply buy a couple of category-five ethernet cables with male RJ-45 jacks on each end. Or if you want to wire your entire home, purchase few rolls of category-five twisted pair wiring and a number of male and female RJ-45 jacks.

You can buy rolls of wiring quite inexpensively from a company such as **Inmac Corp.** of New Jersey (**www.inmac.com**). Put on an old pair of clothes and run the wiring throughout the house, bringing it all back to one central location, likely your home office.

Work the wiring through ducts, holes in the wall, the rafters, wherever. The trickiest part is hooking up the RJ-45 jacks to the wiring. You can buy a tool to do this yourself or hire a local company to install them for a minimal fee.

At the central location, install a network hub, a box into which all of these wires will connect. You are looking at a cost of $75 to $300 or more, depending on the number of ports in the hub. If you plan to link only two or three computers, you can get away with a four-port hub; for more than that, go with an eight- or 16-port version so that you've got some growth potential.

Then buy a network card for each computer. These will cost you upward of $30 for your desktop PC, and $125 or more for your laptop. Keep in mind that many Macintosh computers, including the recent Imac, are shipped with a network card built in, as do some PCs.

Once you've installed the network cards, plug an ethernet jack into each computer and plug the other ends of all the wires into the hub. Now comes the tricky part: You have to configure your Macintosh or Windows network. It can be a little complicated with Windows, but simple with Macintosh.

To figure out what's involved, look for several handy guides on the Internet that walk you through the configuration process. Two notable Web sites are Wingate's at **www.wingate.com/lansetup.htm** and Doug's Networking Pages' at **compnet.home.mindspring.com/win95.htm**

Plug it in, fire up your computers and if you've done it right, you're in business.

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